Anarchism and Community Politics

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The last issue of Black Flag had an article on the "Independent Working Class Association" (IWCA) called *"Fighting on Home Turf: Community politics and the IWCA."* As the article noted, bar the Harringey Solidarity Group, there is "no compatible anarchist organisations doing the same sort of work." For that reason it was good to hear what the IWCA was doing.

Sadly, however, the author shied away from critiquing the IWCA and, in particular, its electoralism. Yes, many anarchists do "feel uneasy" about the IWCA standing in elections and it is a shame that all the author did was to state they were not going to "rerun arguments about elections." I think that we should be discussing why anarchists "feel uneasy" about electioneering and, more importantly, discussing alternatives to it.

This is nothing to do with dogma or sectarianism. It is to do with understanding how we can change the world for the better while, at the same time, avoiding the mistakes of the past. It seems incredible that some anarchists are participating in an organisation using tactics which have failed time and time again. I know that most Marxists tend to ignore evidence and history in favour of a blind repetition of the conclusions a couple of dead German's drew 150 years ago from a short period of British labour history, but I thought better of anarchists.

I won't go into why anarchists reject electioneering in any depth. History shows that it produces reformism. Whether it be the Marxist Social Democrats before the First World War or the German Greens, the experience of organisations using this tactic have confirmed the anarchist analysis. All it produced was a slow and slippery decent into reformism, hidden behind radical rhetoric. Unsurprisingly, Lula in Brazil who has now joined that large pantheon of leftists who betray their voters and implement pro-capitalist policies.

Even if radicals managed to get into office with their politics intact, they would soon face economic and political pressure to conform to the capitalist agenda. Any radical administration would face pressures from capitalists resulting from capital flight, withdrawal of support. Politically, the pressure is just as bad. We must remember that there is a difference between the state and government. The state is the permanent collection of institutions that have entrenched power structures and interests. The government is made up of various politicians. It's the institutions that have power in the state due to their permanence, not the representatives who come and go. So real power does not lie with politicians, but instead within the state bureaucracy and big business. Faced with these powers, we have seen left-wing governments introduce right-wing policies. So we cannot expect different politicians to act in different ways to the same pressures.

Every supporter of electioneering argues that they will be an exception to this sorry process. They can only appeal to the good intentions and character of their candidates. Anarchists, however, present an analysis of the structures and other influences that will determine how the character of the successful candidates and political parties will change.

Parliamentarianism, moreover, focuses the fight for change into the hands of leaders. Rather than those involved doing the fighting, the organising, the decision making, that power rests in the hands of the representative. The importance of the leaders is stressed. Politics become considered as parliamentary activities made **for** the population by their representatives, with the 'rank and file' left with no other role than that of passive support. Instead of working class self-activity and self-organisation, there is a substitution and a non working class leadership acting **for** people replaces self-management in social struggle.

An Alternative

Those libertarians in the IWCA are correct to argue that anarchists should work in their local communities. However, anarchists have done and are doing just that and are being very successful as well. The difference is that anarchists should be building self-managed community organisations rather than taking part in the capitalist state. That way we build a real alternative to the existing system while fighting for improvements in the here and now.

That can only be done by direct action and anti-parliamentarian organisation. Through direct action, people manage their own struggles, it is they who conduct it, organise it. They do not hand over to others their own acts and task of self-liberation. That way, we become accustomed to managing our own affairs, creating alternative, libertarian, forms of social organisation which can become a force to resist the state, win reforms and become the framework of a free society.

This form of community activity can be called "community syndicalism." It means the building of community assemblies which can address the issues of their members and propose means of directly tackling them. It would mean federating these assemblies into a wider organisation. If it sounds familiar that is not surprising as something similar was done during the campaign against the poll-tax.

The idea of community assemblies has a long history. Kropotkin, for example, pointed to the sections and districts of the French Revolution, arguing that there the masses were *"accustoming themselves to act without receiving orders from the national representatives, were practising what was to be described later as Direct Self-Government."* He concluded that *"the principles of anarchism ... already dated from 1789, and that they had their origin, not in theoretical speculations, but in the **deeds** of the Great French Revolution"* and that *"the libertarians would no doubt do the same to-day."* (**The Great French Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 203, p. 204 and p. 206)

A similar concern for community organising and struggle was expressed in Spain. While the collectives during the revolution are well known, the CNT had long organised in the community and around non-workplace issues. As well as defence committees in various working class communities to organise and co-ordinate struggles and insurrections, the CNT organised various community based struggles. The most famous example of this must be the CNT organised rent strikes during the early 1930s in Barcelona. In 1931, the CNT's Construction Union organised a *"Economic Defence Commission"* to study working class expenses such as rent. The basic demand was for a 40% rent decrease, but also addressed unemployment and the cost of food. The campaign was launched by a mass meeting on May 1st, 1931. Three days later, an unemployed family was re-installed into the home they had been evicted from. This was followed by other examples across the city. By August, Barcelona had 100,000 rent strikers (see Nick Rider, *"The Practice of Direct Action: the Barcelona rent strike of 1931"* in **For Anarchism**, edited by David Goodway)

In Gijon, the CNT *"reinforced its populist image by ... its direct consumer campaigns. Some of these were organised through the federation's Anti-Unemployment Committee, which sponsored numerous rallies and marches in favour of 'bread and work.' While they focused on the issue of jobs, they also addressed more general concerns about the cost of living for poor families. In a May 1933 rally, for example, demonstrators asked that families of unemployed workers not be evicted from their homes, even if they fell behind on the rent."* The *"organisers made the connections between home and work and tried to draw the entire family into the struggle."* However, the CNT's *"most concerted attempt to bring in the larger community was the formation of a new syndicate, in the spring of 1932, for the Defence of Public Interests (SDIP). In contrast to a conventional union, which*

comprised groups of workers, the SDIP was organised through neighbourhood committees. Its specific purpose was to enforce a generous renters' rights law of December 1931 that had not been vigorously implemented. Following anarchosyndicalist strategy, the SDIP utilised various forms of direct action, from rent strikes, to mass demonstrations, to the reversal of evictions." This last action involved the local SDIP group going to a home, breaking the judge's official eviction seal and carrying the furniture back in from the street. They left their own sign: ***"opened by order of the CNT."*** The CNT's direct action strategies *"helped keep political discourse in the street, and encouraged people to pursue the same extra-legal channels of activism that they had developed under the monarchy."* (Pamela Beth Radcliff, **From mobilization to civil war : the politics of polarization in the Spanish city of Gijon, 1900–1937**, pp. 287–288, p. 289)

More recently, in Southern Italy, anarchists have organised a very successful **Municipal Federation of the Base** (FMB) in Spezzano Albanese. This organisation is *"an alternative to the power of the town hall"* and provides a *"glimpse of what a future libertarian society could be"* (in the words of one activist). The aim of the Federation is *"the bringing together of all interests within the district. In intervening at a municipal level, we become involved not only in the world of work but also the life of the community… the FMB make counter proposals [to Town Hall decisions], which aren't presented to the Council but proposed for discussion in the area to raise people's level of consciousness. Whether they like it or not the Town Hall is obliged to take account of these proposals."* (*"Community Organising in Southern Italy"*, pp. 16–19, **Black Flag** no. 210)

In this way, local people take part in deciding what effects them and their community and create a self-managed "dual power" to the local, and national, state. They also, by taking part in self-managed community assemblies, develop their ability to participate and manage their own affairs, so showing that the state is unnecessary and harmful to their interests. In addition, the FMB also supports co-operatives within it, so creating a communalised, self-managed economic sector within capitalism.

The long, hard work of the CNT in Spain resulted in mass village assemblies being created in the Puerto Real area, near Cadiz in the late 1980s. These community assemblies came about to support an industrial struggle by shipyard workers. As one CNT member explains, *"every Thursday of every week, in the towns and villages in the area, we had all-village assemblies where anyone connected with the particular issue [of the rationalisation of the shipyards], whether they were actually workers in the shipyard itself, or women or children or grandparents, could go along… and actually vote and take part in the decision making process of what was going to take place."* With such popular input and support, the shipyard workers won their struggle. However, the assembly continued after the strike and *"managed to link together twelve different organisations within the local area that are all interested in fighting… various aspects [of capitalism]"* including health, taxation, economic, ecological and cultural issues. Moreover, the struggle *"created a structure which was very different from the kind of structure of political parties, where the decisions are made at the top and they filter down. What we managed to do in Puerto Real was make decisions at the base and take them upwards."* (**Anarcho-Syndicalism in Puerto Real: from shipyard resistance to direct democracy and community control**, p. 6)

Even more recently, the Argentina revolt saw community assemblies develop. Like the sections of the French Revolution, they were directly democracy and played a key role in pushing the revolt forward (see *"From Riot to Revolution"*, **Black Flag**, no. 221). Unsurprisingly, the politicians were aghast at the people actually wanting to make their own decisions — even going so far as to label them "undemocratic." Faced with real democracy, the politicians quickly tried to concoct

a general election to place the focus of events away from the mass of the population and back onto a few politicians working in capitalist institutions. And, of course, the left went along with this farce, helping the bourgeoisie disempower the grassroots organisations created in and for direct struggle.

Conclusion

These examples all show the possibilities of "community syndicalism." They show anarchists creating viable libertarian alternatives in the community. In contrast to the deadend of electioneering, they involved people in managing their own affairs and struggles directly. They did not let a few leaders fight their battles for them within bourgeois institutions. Moreover, it allowed revolutionaries to apply their ideas in practical ways which did not have the same deradicalising and reformist tendencies as electioneering.

Ultimately, the recent turn to electoral politics by the left is (as it always is) a sign of weakness, ***not*** strength. Such a strategy of building alternative community organisations is much harder than trying to get people to vote for you every few years. It would be a shame for anarchists to follow the left down the well-trodden path to opportunism and reformism. The left is declining, politically, morally and organisationally. We should be talking about how we can create a libertarian alternative which has practical ideas on how to apply our ideas in the here and now. But it seems that some libertarians seem happier to join non-anarchist groups than try and develop a genuine anarchist approach to the problem of spreading our ideas within our class.

Hopefully these examples from our past will provoke a wider discussion on where to go now. The question now becomes one of whether we build upon the work and experience of previous anarchists or we ignore them in favour of the repeating the same errors over and over again by applying the ideas of two long dead Germans, ideas which anarchists like Bakunin correctly predicted would fail?

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An anarchist critique of the community politics of the Independent Working Class Association from Black Flag issue 224, 2004.

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